**Where Does it Hurt?**

A Meditation on 1 Samuel 1: 1 – 17 and Mark 5: 24b – 34

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church August 15, 2021

“Where does it hurt?” That’s a brave question to ask. A bold question. Unless you are in the medical profession, it’s a question you might avoid asking. “Tell me about your pain,” isn’t on the list for cocktail party conversation. We talk sports. (Or well, most of you talk sports…I try to listen with appreciation for your enthusiasm.) We talk about the misery of August heat. What shows we are streaming. We talk about our pets or our kids, or our pets who *are* our kids. Now we talk about the pandemic, and masks, and vaccines. Hospital capacities, and break through infections. I’m not suggesting you move “where does it hurt” to the top of the list as a conversation icebreaker, but in relationships of trust, it is a holy question.

We can’t ever truly know another’s pain. It doesn’t matter if they had the same surgery as you, or failed the same test you failed, or grieved the death of a parent as you did. Others have known abuse or rejection or oppression as have you, but each one’s pain is their own. Each story is unique.

Where does it hurt?

What causes it to hurt?

How long have you been hurting?

These are questions that, similar to last week’s question, “Where are You From?” acknowledge the other, recognize the other, convey compassion for the other.

I’m not sure there is any such things as good pain, but we know that there is the pain experienced during recovery, the pain of labor which results in new life, the pain of longing…for a dream, a goal – an ache that may lead to wholeness. Pain can lead to change. Hopes fulfilled. This is true both within ourselves, and within our communities.

Today we heard the story of Hannah, and her multi-layered pain: shame and failure due to being barren, jealousy of her husband’s children by other wives, sorrow in her own desire for a baby. Her pain was something her spouse could not understand. He didn’t deny that she was in pain, but he might have been happier if she could have denied it. “Lift yourself out of this!” He urged her. “My love is worth ten sons!” Her future was bleak, her barrenness brought nothing but shame, and the man who loved her did nothing to address the bullying taking place within their home.

Somehow, she didn’t blame God for her pain, or doubt God’s presence in her life. In her pain, she turned to God, to the safety of the temple. She probably didn’t go there intending to have a “come apart” (as we call them), but that’s what happened. In her honesty with God, she let down all the walls. She was her authentic self. “Here I am, a weeping mess. God, help me!”

But Eli, the priest, had never seen her like this, and he allowed his assumptions to get in the way. And people say the Bible isn’t relevant? We explored this idea last week - assumptions people make based on your heritage. Here we go again - assumptions get us in trouble when we think we know what someone is feeling or thinking or experiencing. Eli didn’t see unrestrained sorrow; he saw the inhibited behavior of someone who “must be drunk”! How often have I made similar assumptions…dismissed someone as rude or angry or uncaring, when in reality it was their pain that was bursting through the surface. Instead of asking, “Are you okay?” Eli says, “How long will you act like a drunk?” Fortunately, the story doesn’t go on to say that Eli forcibly removed her from the temple and told her to come back when she was sober. Eli listened. He didn’t exactly apologize, but he listened, and offered her a blessing, offered her God’s peace.

Can we find ourselves in each of these characters? Have we, like Elkanah, dismissed someone’s pain, or tried to diminish its impact through pretty words and gifts? Have we ignored the bullying before us, pretending it doesn’t exist? Have we, like Penninah, ridiculed someone’s pain? Or, have we, like Eli, mistaken pain for something else entirely, allowing our assumptions to get in the way? Pain is messy, and someone else’s pain sometimes bumps up against our own, uncovering it when we would prefer for it to stay hidden. Are we willing to ask ourselves, “where do I hurt?” knowing that if we allow that pain to remain unexamined, it will only cause our hearts to harden rather than expand. Without peace within ourselves, how can we extend peace to others? “Go in peace,” Eli said to Hannah. “God is listening.”

Hannah is a child of God, complete, just as she is, but Hannah lived in a society, a system that preached a different message. She was soon blessed with a child, and that child set her free from shame, but she did not need that child in order to have worth. We will return to Hannah, but let’s fast forward to the story of another individual in pain, a woman whose name we do not know.

Mark tells us the story of a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years. She had spent all she had on doctors, and her situation had only grown worse. She is unknown, unnamed, unseen…for now. But she is far from timid. She believes she deserves to be made well, to be freed from pain and suffering. She believes in God’s love for her, and, like Hannah, she believes God has no choice but to listen.

Was it an impulsive decision to join the mass of people surrounding Jesus, to lose herself in the crowd as he made his way to heal the daughter of a synagogue leader? For all of her determination, she only hoped to touch his cloak, she never expected Jesus to notice her. Besides, he wouldn’t have time to stop – he was on his way to do something much more important. It was the perfect opportunity – what did she have to lose? And as the crowd presses forward in hopes of witnessing a healing, a healing takes place in their midst. Quietly, unpretentiously. She receives what she seeks…physical healing. But Jesus knows the healing is incomplete until the story is told. She deserves to be seen. She deserves to have the God of love hear her story, her whole painful story, and she deserves to know that God comes not to shame, but to heal and restore. God comes to bring peace.

And so Jesus asks, “how long have you been hurting?” And she tells him the whole painful story. Affirming her faith before a community of witnesses, Jesus calls her “daughter,” and she finds that she does belong to a family more expansive than she had ever imagined. Then Jesus speaks the words that Eli spoke to Hannah, “Go in peace.”

When we look at these stories, stories of two people in pain, both suffering in ways that caused them to feel disconnected from their communities, we are reminded that there are many ways to ask, “Where does it hurt?” We can ask that question in the context of trusted relationships, share our pain in trusted relationship. But we are also called to look around and ask this question of our culture? “Where does it hurt?”

Where are people suffering because we have created a culture saturated in unrealistic expectations and demands? How do we humiliate others when they don’t live up to those expectations?

Where does it hurt?

In the hearts and minds of those who don’t fit under the label “typical.”

Wherever we witness bullying and discrimination over race or gender or age or disability or neurodiversity or \_\_\_\_\_\_ and turn away, saying nothing, doing nothing.

Where does it hurt?

In clinics and hospitals and back streets…

A broken health care system in need of repair.

Every day, people like the unnamed woman in Mark are desperate for treatment, are spending everything they have.

Where does it hurt?

In the ground beneath our feet…

Our planet crying out, weary from the abuses to earth, sea and air.

Where does it hurt?

In the bodies of the working poor…

people who cannot earn a decent wage, can’t cobble together enough $7.25/hour minimum wage jobs to put food on their tables.

Where does it hurt?

In the bodies of people of color.

People who are so tired of waiting for someone to actually remember their stories…stories of slaughter, of enslavement, of discrimination, of incarceration.

Where does it hurt?

We – each of us – has the potential to listen to these stories, to silence the noise around us and listen, and in the listening we may find a way to be - not a hero – but an ally, a companion.

If we had continued on to Hannah’s song, we would have heard her sing these words:

God raises the poor from the dust,   lifts up the needy from the garbage pile.
    God sits them with officials,  gives them the seat of honor!
The pillars of the earth belong to the Lord;  he set the world on top of them!

 (1 Samuel 2: 8, CEB)

Hannah didn’t sing a sweet lullaby to her baby. She sang a song about being delivered from enemies. She understood what it was to be oppressed, to be bullied, and in solidarity she sang of freedom for all God’s people.

We will all know pain in this life, some will know it much more deeply than others. Let us be gentle with one another, reminding ourselves that there is so much we do not know of each other’s stories. Let us listen. Let us learn. Let us look to God, who shares in our longings for healing, for one another, for our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.